

Book review

*Performing The Eighteenth Century: Theatrical
Discourses, Practices and Artefacts*

Stockholm University Press, 2023, 334 pages.¹

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Deep Dive into the Eighteenth Century

The collection of articles, discussions, and interviews *Performing The Eighteenth Century: Theatrical Discourses, Practices and Artefacts* is an unforgettable and exciting journey into premodernity with all the details of the time brought back to the stage today in order to question the intervening times and traditions in performing arts, particularly, opera. On the one hand, it is a piece of meticulous, in-depth research that has brought together history, theory, and practice, which is not a regularity in academic research. On the other hand – the book can be used as a very practical guide to staging eighteenth-century operas today, uncovering potential challenges and solutions depending on the chosen performers and their experience, the place (stage), and the audience. Basically, one could not find a better, more precise discussion on “How to stage an eighteenth-century opera?” today, free from any embarrassment of one’s personal ignorance, as the authors invite each other to dig deeper, cross-reference each other, and keep the conversation alive instead of presenting a set of didactic indications. I would

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describe it as a must-read compendium for practitioners of eighteenth-century theatre performing arts, as well as theatre scholars and musicologists to be. One may be surprised by the ease with which the text holds the reader's attention and entices them to discover more chapter by chapter. This is the case when professional literature dares to bring in some excitement from behind the scenes of both the practical and academic part of the research.

The departure point to this book is the research project "Performing Premodernity", which brought together an international group of theatre scholars whose work centred on the Drottningholm Theatre, built in 1766 near Stockholm, a truly iconic place among Swedish theatres that preserves the authentic stage machinery of the eighteenth century. In this environment, a series of experiments with costumes and vocal & acting techniques were conducted, finally reaching the conclusions presented in each of the essays. The question that results is to advocate for historically informed performance, but not in the purest sense. The scholars are aware that most audiences and even performers (unless they have received special education) tend to be ignorant of the codes, gestures, and other peculiarities of the performativity of the time. What they look for is the optimal degree of "authenticity" that would deliver the idea in the most comprehensible way to a modern audience, with or without specific knowledge of the respective period and/or style.

The main research questions are posed by the editor and scholar Magnus Tessing Schneider in the introduction as follows: "What can artists learn from theatre scholars when it comes to performing historical works on stage today? What can theatre scholars learn from today's artists when it comes to understanding the works and practices of the past? How is the experience of modern spectators affected by attending performances in historic theatres? And how, aesthetically, do we experience the reconstruction of productions from the remote past?" (p. 1). The three-part book reaches answers gradually, page by page, from theoretical issues to practical ones, coming to conclusions via thorough case studies performed at Drottningholm in the flesh.

It is rather hard to highlight one essay over the others, since they all are put into context with great mastery and, if I may, great *artistry*, as well. One of the key terms that several authors

land on, is “aesthetic historicity”, i.e. exploring the possibilities of anchoring the past’s artefacts in the modern situation and audience through historiographical (re)construction (a term borrowed from Willmar Sauter’s contribution), put into action by today’s performers, namely tenor João Luís Veloso Paixão and soprano Laila Cathleen Neumann. This approach turns out to be fruitful in the eyes of experienced practitioners, such as musician Mark Tatlow, who cross-references Willmar Sauter validating the term “aesthetic historicity” as a historical-work-of-art-in performance-today not despite, but because of the temporal distance (p. 136) between the performers and the piece.

In particular, Willmar Sauter, Meike Wagner, and Magnus Tessing Schneider constitute the theoretical discourse of performing premodernity, highlighting the historiographical twists and turns in the field and discussing Meike Wagner’s concept of praxeology, which aims to challenge the historiographical epistemology through experimental theatre practice today, but as stated in the available sources. Furthermore, Schneider refers to Jan Kott and juxtaposes contemporaneity and topicality, emphasizing the experience of presence that makes it possible to cross the spatial and temporal distance in order to embody the past in front of a modern audience (p. 87). Contemporaneity is an experience of presence that allows us to enter a space-time unique to it. It partially recalls Georg Gadamer’s concept of being grounded in tradition (*Überlieferung*), of which all stakeholders, including performers, scholars, and the audience, must be aware. Detailed baroque opera case studies in this body of research provide the building blocks of that bridge between the successful delivery of the performance and contextual comment. The awareness of aesthetic historicity and discourses in action is what makes this research exciting both for music and theatre makers and performing arts theoreticians.

It is exciting to read the two contributions by Petra Dotlačilová, where she analyses the fruitful creative workshop held in Ulriksdal Palace Theatre (built in 1753) near Stockholm, focusing on costumes and lights, namely, candlelight, to reconstruct the authentic atmosphere of eighteenth-century opera performances through a physical experiment called “Materiality in Action”, and the other where she explores the costumes of Rousseau’s *Pygmalion*, discussed in

detail previously in the chapter by Maria Gullstam.

Last, but not least, an especially inspiring contribution is the direct voices: conversations with performers of historically-informed performances from this combined research. It is particularly interesting to dive into the performer's perspective since it is a totally different approach from a researcher's point of view. Thus, *Swimming in the Water of Theatrical Conventions*, a polylog with singers Laila Cathleen Neuman and João Luis Paixão, leads to discoveries that could not be found by any other means than talking to the artists who share their respective experiences of embodying the eighteenth century, first in 2015 at Český Krumlov Palace in the Czech Republic and secondly at Drottningholm Theatre in Sweden. In addition, the discussion between distinguished panellists analysed at the end of the book by Meike Wagner uncovers the potential and challenges of historical theatre sites today, whilst the edited transcript of the speech delivered by David Willes provides the reader with an almost cinematic text about the venue mentioned extensively in the book.

In short, *Performing The Eighteenth Century: Theatrical Discourses, Practices and Artefacts* represents an essential source of information for anyone working with the repertoire in question, both for performance and academic research. The theory-praxis-based anthology already functions as a handbook for staging eighteenth-century operas in quite a few projects across Europe, and I predict that more and more interested producers and musicians will use it in the future. In it, theatre and music scholars will find a fresh, helpful source of references and material to develop their lectures.